

# A SPRINT to Guam: Psychological First Aid in the COVID-19 Pandemic

## U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Navy Medicine has continually turned to its arsenal of public health, and preventive medicine professionals and tools to help mitigate the spread of disease. Less visible, but no less important, has been the role of our mental health team in providing psychological first aid.

On April 4th Navy Medicine deployed a Special Psychiatric Rapid Intervention Team (SPRINT) to Guam to provide psychological first aid to the Sailors of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, who were impacted by an outbreak of COVID-19 on the ship.



This was the first time in the 40-plus years of SPRINT deployments that the team mobilized in response to a disease outbreak.

Cmdr. Michael Kim, a staff psychiatrist at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, served as the lead for SPRINT-West (W). His team consisted of a clinical psychologist, a behavioral health technician and a general duty corpsman.

This mission was uncharted water for SPRINT, which typically provides short-term mental health support to a command or activity immediately following a disaster.

"This time around, there wasn't a specific big incident," said Kim. "You have a virus that is hitting a ship, but at that point, there weren't any deaths; there weren't any people hospitalized. There was nothing that warranted a typical psychological first-aid response, so that's what made this particular SPRINT mission very interesting because there was no precedent."

SPRINT has been a mainstay for post-disaster operations since the program was conceived by a group of psychiatrists based at Naval Hospital Portsmouth, Virginia in the 1970s.

In the last forty years SPRINTs have deployed following hurricanes and aircraft mishaps, the Beirut barracks bombing (1983), Exxon Valdez oil spill (1989), the USS Cole attack (2000), September 11th (2001), the Virginia Tech and Washington Navy Yard shootings, and the USS Fitzgerald and USS McCain ship collisions.

Kim and his team worked in conjunction with Naval Hospital Guam, 3rd Medical Battalion, Task Force Hotel (the medical personnel assigned to the quarantine facilities) and also the Chaplain Corps in providing consultation services to shipboard crew.

When he learned that the Sailors were to be given a twice daily online survey, Kim ensured that it included the following statement: "This is an abnormal situation and it's normal to have a stressful reaction. If you would like to talk to somebody, please indicate 'yes.'"

Sailors who checked "yes" received a phone call from SPRINT personnel. "The main intention of the survey was to be able to assess subjective COVID symptoms of every Sailor, and there were a lot of Sailors. It gave us an opportunity to capture any Sailors who wanted to talk," said Kim.

Although initial consultations came from the results of the survey, the SPRINT was able to connect with additional Sailors through referrals from the Task Force Hotel and Chaplains based at the 10 locations housing crewmembers, as well as the Roosevelt's psychologist, who was also in quarantine.

In the end, SPRINT found that despite the hardships and anxiety of the unknown, the crew was remarkably resilient.

For Lt. Lyndse Anderson, who serves as the Assistant Head of SPRINT-W, missions like these hold special meaning. "SPRINT always mobilizes with the belief that our Sailors and Marines are inherently resilient and capable of navigating even the most difficult of circumstances but we find it a privilege to be an added support."

For Cmdr. Kim this was a new opportunity for SPRINT to adapt to a "new normal" without the typical face-to-face interaction. "This mission allowed us to build the foundation for future responses, especially with the global reach of this current pandemic."